Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

INDEX

SASKATCHEWAN INNOVATOR HONOURED WITH AGRI-FOOD AWARD OF EXCELLENCE 06-48-220

SASKATCHEWAN GRAIN DRIVES ACTIVITY AT PORT OF CHURCHILL 06-48-221

KEEPING COOL THIS WINTER 06-48-222

4-H EARNS SUPPORT THROUGH GOOD WORK WITH YOUTH 06-48-223

OAT GROWERS TO FEATURE RESEARCH AND MARKET TIPS 06-48-224

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SASKATCHEWAN INNOVATOR HONOURED WITH AGRI-FOOD AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

The Canadian Agri-Food Awards of Excellence have been handed out each year since 2001 to recognize outstanding achievement in five areas that are considered vital to the continued success of the agricultural sector.

Unbelievably, no one from Saskatchewan, the province with the most diverse and innovative agricultural sector in the land, had ever been honoured with such an award – until now.

Lee Whittington is the Manager of Information Services with the Prairie Swine Centre, a non-profit research and technology organization affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan. At the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair last month in Toronto, he took home the province's first ever Agri-Food Award of Excellence, in the category of Agricultural Awareness and Education.

Whittington received the honour for his "dedication, enthusiasm and vision in establishing the Pork Interpretive Gallery," or PIG, at the Prairie Swine Centre's Elstow Research Farm.

"The Pork Interpretive Gallery is basically a science centre that is located in the attic of a commercial-style pork barn," Whittington said. The concept stemmed from a set of meetings that took place in 1998, when the Prairie Swine Centre was looking at establishing a new research farm. Officials from the centre traveled Western Canada, meeting with researchers, farmers, veterinarians and other people associated with the pig industry to see what questions they felt would need to be answered by research in the coming years.

"One of the things that kept coming up at these meetings, which was completely unexpected, was the request by the industry to allow people into the hog barns," Whittington said.

However, there are considerable bio-security precautions incorporated into the pork industry, and access to the barns is very restricted. "Basically, nobody gets in unless they've got a really good reason for being there," he stated. "Doors are locked tight, there are shower facilities for people to use before they enter, and all clothing worn inside is supplied by the farm." Because of these precautions, the notion of taking tour groups or school students through such facilities was simply unworkable.

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But when Whittington and his counterparts looked into the design of the barn as they were building it, they realized there was a lot of space up in the attic, and saw a great opportunity to build a bio-secure walkway. Visitors could be brought inside the shell of the barn, then view the pigs through windows in the ceiling, thereby maintaining a separate air space between the animals and the observers.

"We've got a dozen great big, 12-foot-wide windows that look into every aspect of the barn," Whittington stated. "You can see pigs at all stages of growth, and different types of housing configurations that are available in the barn. Then, between the windows are displays talking about what the pork industry is all about." There are exhibits discussing issues such as odour management and the use of by-products generated by pork processing, such as hog hair, and the pigs' ears that end up as dog treats.

The project became a collaborative effort, with producers and pork associations from Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario all participating and contributing more than $500,000 towards the initiative.

To date, more than 4,000 people have visited the "living classroom" that helps dispel myths and misconceptions about the pork industry. But Whittington humbly defers the credit he receives for the PIG interpretive centre.

"PIG is an educational exhibit that tries to address and provide facts about the pork industry. The pork industry has a wonderful story to tell, but that story tends not to get told, or certainly doesn't get as much press as the negatives that surround livestock agriculture," he said.

"So, the award is a tremendous acknowledgement of the importance of keeping agriculture in the forefront of all the population. To me, it really points to the fact that there is a keen interest by many groups out there to see agriculture's story updated and told in modern terms as to what exactly happens in a modern pork production facility."

Whittington says the centre has done a terrific job of advancing public awareness and education about the pork industry. "When you take a group of kids through, and they see what a barn is really all about, some of the comments you get back are, 'Gee, I hope I can work in a place like this some day.' I'm sure that's not the discussion they had with their parents the night before when they said they were going out to a pig barn."

Guided tours of the PIG facility are available to interested individuals, groups or school classes. They can be arranged by contacting Jessica Podhordeski, the Agricultural Education Co-ordinator for the Saskatchewan Pork Development Board in Saskatoon, at (306) 343-3508.

- 30 -

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SASKATCHEWAN GRAIN DRIVES ACTIVITY AT PORT OF CHURCHILL

Once again, in 2006, Saskatchewan grain made up the vast majority of the shipping through the Port of Churchill, Manitoba.

According to the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), there were 384,000 tonnes of wheat and durum shipped through Churchill this year. The total was an increase over the 353,000 tonnes in 2005, as well as the 361,000 tonnes shipped in 2004.

OmnxiTRAX Inc. owns and manages the port facility and the single rail line that connects to Churchill from The Pas, Manitoba. Michael Ogborn, managing director of OmniTRAX, said, "We have repeatedly shown that this port operation is more than capable of efficiently handling grain and other cargos. It has a very bright future, provided our core wheat traffic remains strong."

This year, grain was loaded on a total of 12 vessels, which were destined to deliver to customers in Mexico, Europe and Africa. The final departure of the season left on November 2, carrying 44,000 tonnes destined for Sudan. Past delivery destinations have included Belgium, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, Greece, Morocco, Norway and Turkey. Over the past four years, the biggest customer for Churchill shipments has been Italy, which has received some 283,000 tonnes.

CWB shipments represent approximately 80 per cent of the grain passing through Churchill. Board spokesperson Maureen Fitzhenry said the CWB remains committed to Churchill "because it makes economic sense to farmers." She added that the agency is supportive of non-Board shipments, as well, in order to "maintain the viability of the port." The CWB is targeted to deliver about 400,000 tonnes per year to Churchill, with the port's continued operation based on an objective of 500,000 tonnes per year, total.

The primary catchment area for Churchill deliveries is northeast Saskatchewan, comprising the regions around Prince Albert, Humboldt, Canora and points north. For producers in these areas, the Churchill route is simply less expensive than shipping through Thunder Bay or Vancouver. Approximately 35 to 40 per cent of producers receive a Churchill Freight Adjustment Rebate to guarantee that cost difference.

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The port is normally ice-free for five months per year, with the shipping season beginning in July and running to November. In 2006, the port operators, local workers in Churchill and the railways worked together to maximize shipments, despite facing some stormy weather in October. Workers remained on the job around the clock during the last few weeks of the season to meet shipping schedules set by the Canadian Coast Guard.

According to Fitzhenry, "the railways made a considerable effort" to provide and turn around grain cars in a timely fashion.

Since 1996, Saskatchewan wheat and durum have comprised the bulk of shipments through the Port of Churchill, which have totalled some 4.2 million tones.

- 30 -

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and Food

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KEEPING COOL THIS WINTER

It is never that hard to keep yourself cool in Saskatchewan in winter, but the Canola Council of Canada is urging producers to make sure their crop stays cool as well.

Canola Council of Canada agronomist David Vanthuyne says crop temperature is critical to maintaining quality and maximizing canola profit. He says monitoring is even more important this year. "Much of the canola crop went into the bin hot this year," he noted.

Vanthuyne says grain temperature monitoring systems or bin probes provide the most accurate assessment of the health of stored canola. Alternatively, Vanthuyne suggests that growers take proactive measures by removing a load of canola from different bins when they're filling canola contracts.

At the very least, he recommends that growers turn the canola regularly by taking one or a number of loads out of each canola bin to break up any pockets of unstable canola within the mass of the grain.

Vanthuyne, the council's agronomist in eastern Saskatchewan, says growers can look at various conditioning systems, but "the object is to cool the seed and/or lower its moisture content to below 15 degrees Celsius and eight per cent moisture. Ideally, the lower the temperature, the better," he said.

Canola seed tends to sweat or respire for up to six weeks before becoming dormant, leading to heat damage and mould growth. To avoid spoilage, Vanthuyne advises producers to consider going beyond aeration to condition their canola to safe temperature and moisture levels.

Aeration can be an effective way to avoid spoilage and maintain quality, but Vanthuyne suggests that, if late-harvested canola contains moisture levels above 10 to 12 per cent, growers should consider heated air drying.

For more information on safe canola storage, producers should visit the Canola Council of Canada website, at http://www.canola-council.org/store.aspx.

- 30 -

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4-H EARNS SUPPORT THROUGH GOOD WORK WITH YOUTH

It's not always easy balancing the books when you're a non-profit organization. But because of the important work it does in youth development, often with an agricultural focus, the Saskatchewan 4-H Council gets by with a little help from its friends.

As in past years, the council received a $300,000 grant this year from Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF).

"Saskatchewan 4-H is a trusted, respected organization in the province," said Lyle Stavness, Manager of Renewal Programming with SAF. "Its goals are in line with things SAF would like to promote and see continued in the province, such as working with youth and encouraging their interest in agricultural activities."

Stavness said there are a number of areas that the funding goes towards, including supporting 4-H local and regional club activities; specific projects undertaken by 4-H members at the club level; "4-H Leaders" programs, so that youth are able to receive leadership training and mentorship in a particular project area; and "4-H Extras" initiatives, such as public speaking competitions and livestock judging.

"The 4-H leadership is providing those activities to 4-H members, and SAF is providing support to see that those programs can get delivered," said Stavness.

In addition to the direct financial assistance, SAF provides considerable in-kind support to the organization. For example, the Saskatchewan 4-H Council head office is located in the SAF regional office in Saskatoon.

Stavness noted, "We understand what their strategic plan is and what they are trying to do in terms of working with youth and the agricultural side, and we support generally all of the initiatives that are there. So, SAF is supporting the development of youth through supporting 4-H in its programs."

Saskatchewan 4-H Council Executive Director Valerie Pearson says these contributions are essential to the council's continued operation. "As with most non-profits, managing the books is a challenge we face every year. We receive funding from three sources. We receive a grant from the department (SAF), we have membership fees that we receive from our members, and we receive funding from sponsors," Pearson said.

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"We're very thankful for the government support. We receive that as cash, and then we also receive the in-kind support, which includes our office space. Without that, we wouldn't be here," she added.

Pearson said the SAF assistance actually enables 4-H to operate as an independent non-profit entity, rather than as an agency of government as is the case in many jurisdictions across Canada.

"We're one of the few provinces where the staff members are not government staff. In many provinces, 4-H is actually administered as an office of government. We're structured as a non-profit organization," she said.

"So we're very appreciative of the support we get from government. Without it, we wouldn't be around, certainly not as we are today."

- 30 -

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OAT GROWERS TO FEATURE RESEARCH AND MARKET TIPS

The informal theme of the ninth annual Prairie Oat Growers Association (POGA) conference is "oats and canola go together like a horse and carriage," a nod to the recent buzz over two new canola crushing plants planned for Yorkton.

"The continuing theme is really agronomics," said Jack Dawes with POGA. "It's already known that oats and canola make good rotation crops, and with the buzz about the new canola crush plants in Yorkton, we're expecting a lot of interest."

Yorkton has previously hosted two very successful POGA conferences, and Dawes said this year is looking very promising as well. "The Yorkton conference is always good, in part because we are right in the heart of the oat-growing region," said Dawes. "We expect about 150 in attendance, most of whom will be producers."

The conference is also a great networking opportunity for producers to speak directly to representatives of the buyers for their product. Industry representatives from Agricore United, Can-Oat Milling, Grain Millers, Quaker-PepsiCo and General Mills will all be in attendance. "It's a chance for producers to talk one-on-one with some of the movers and shakers," said Dawes.

The conference organizers aim to include, as much as possible, all of the issues that they think will be of interest to oat producers. Dawes says there is a focus on both research and marketing at this year's conference. "We're looking at 'what are some of the issues in oat breeding and research?'" said Dawes. "That's where the title, 'Thinking Outside the (Research) Box,' comes in."

That presentation will feature Dr. Brian Rossnagel with the Crop Development Centre in Saskatoon, Dr. Jennifer Mitchell-Fetch with the Cereal Research Centre of Winnipeg and Dr. John McKinnon of the University of Saskatchewan. The session is a general update on the latest oat varieties and oat research, as well as information about newly developed feed oat varieties from Dr. McKinnon.

Another conference highlight will be some spirited debate to close the day: a session called "Face-off Time" with David Drozd of Ag-Chieve Corporation and Randy Strychar with Ag Resources Publishing. "These two bring different, unique insights into the industry," said Dawes. "It should be interesting, because they both managed to be quite close in their predictions this year about the upswing in oats along with other commodities."

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Lunch for the day is included with conference registration prices, and there is a special market development being served up: oat pasta and oat soup, courtesy of the efforts of the Saskatchewan Oat Development Commission. The commission looks at all areas of market and research development, but the food market is a natural fit for oats, so conference attendees will be given the chance to sample potential new products.

The conference also features a trade show with exhibits from conference sponsors, including buyers, crop input suppliers and the University of Saskatchewan Crop Development Centre.

The ninth annual Prairie Oat Growers Association conference takes place at St. Mary's Parish Centre in Yorkton on Thursday, December 7, 2006. The cost to register is $20 per person, which includes lunch. Participants can also register to attend the wrap-up banquet, held at the Yorkton Best Western Hotel, for a cost of $25 per person. A block of rooms for conference participants is reserved at the Yorkton Best Western Hotel. Call 1-800-667-1585 and mention your attendance at the conference to receive a special rate.

- 30 -

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